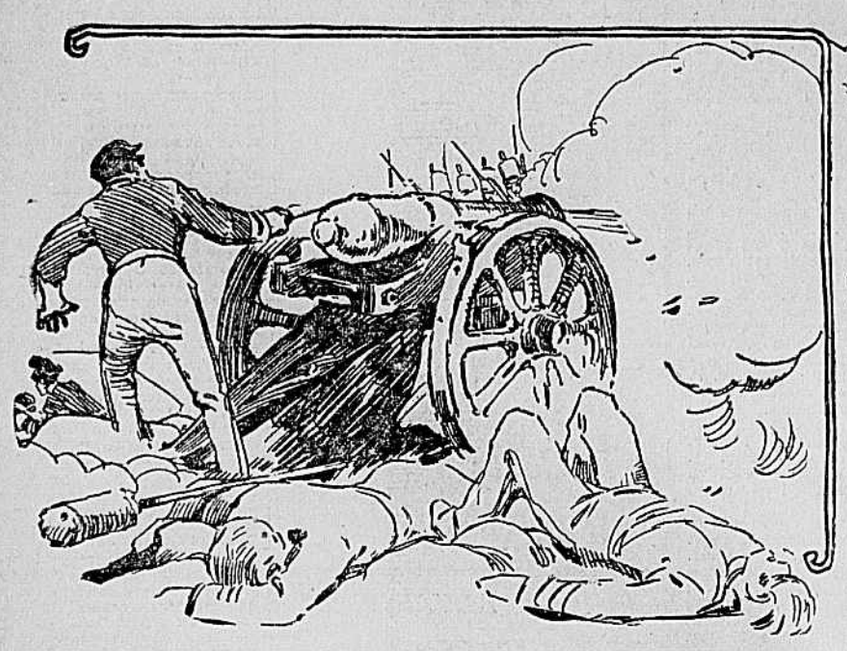
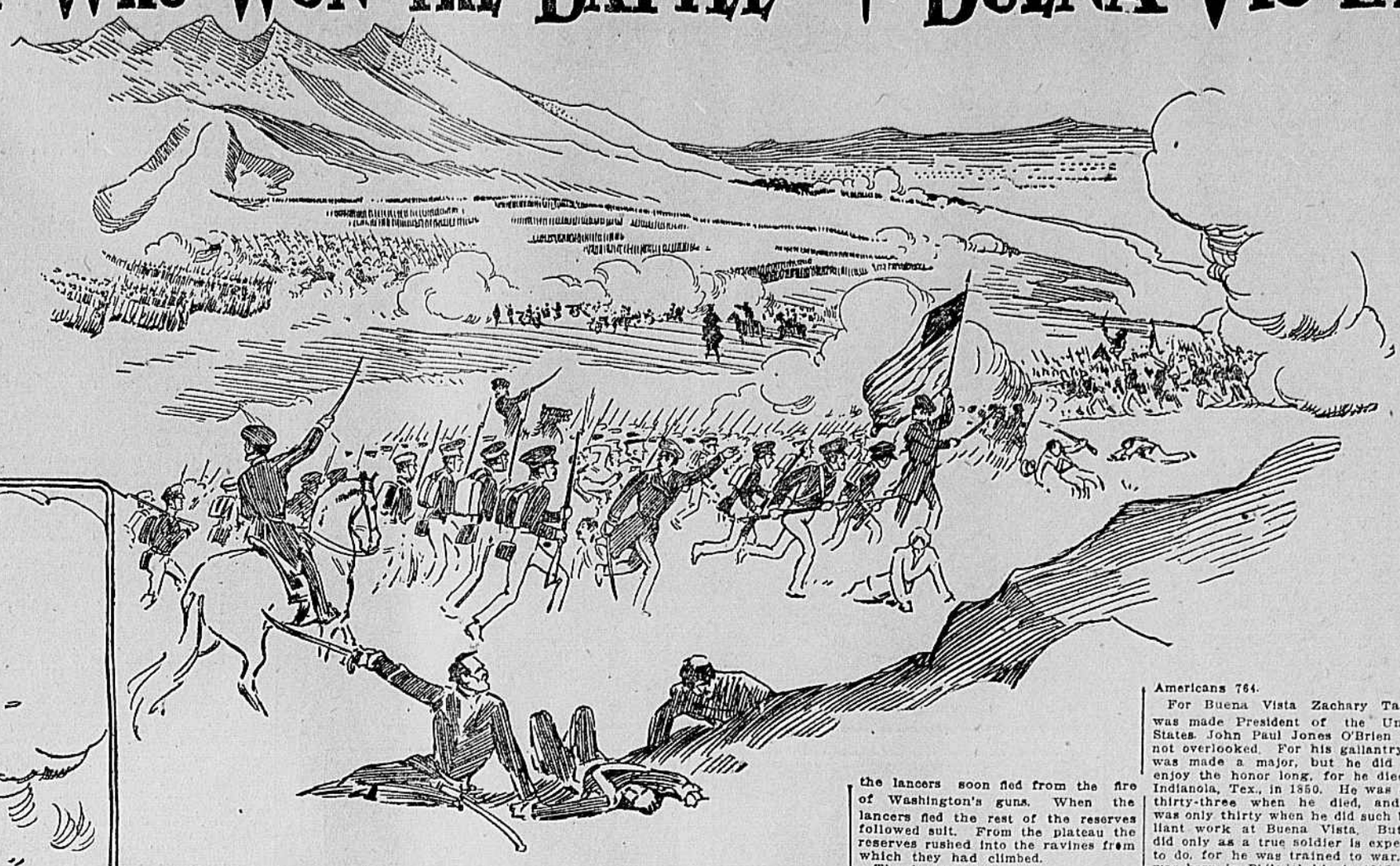
THE LIEUTENANT WHO WON THE BATTLE of BUENA VISTA

JOHN PAUL JONES O'BRIEN Twice the Central Figure Upon Whom the Issue Seemed to Depend.





BY RICHARD SPILLANE.

You may search the regular histories in vain for any mention of the name of John Paul Jones O'Brien, lieutenant of the Army of the United States, yet he won the battle of Buena Vista. All the glory went to Zachary Taylor, for he was the general in command, but twice in the battle the issue depended in large measure upon O'Brien, and each time he proved equal to the emergency. Twice he held the enemy, once when two regiments were in disorderly flight and the Mexicans had victory almost within their grasp, and once when Santa Anna brought his reserves into action and seemed about to annihilate the American force on the southern plateau.

Never were guns employed better than were O'Brien's on that bloody field. Of his original force every man was killed or wounded. Their places were taken by others, but every one of the substitutes was killed or wounded. At last O'Brien worked a gun alone. Wounded himself, he held to his position, the key to the situation, until Taylor was able to hurry forward Bragg's battery, and then the tide of battle turned.

Probably there was never a stranger battlefield than that of Buena Vista. To one side was a mountain range. Of tableland there was but little. The surface of the earth was ripped by innumerable gullies and ravines. Possession of one plateau meant victory. Much of the fighting was in the gullies and ravines, where lancers and infantrymen fought hand to hand.

Santa Anna's plan in swooping down upon Taylor at Buena Vista was a brilliant one. He had recently returned from exile, his return from Cuba being assisted by the United States on the understanding that he would use his influence for peace. Once in Mexico, however, he had thrown himself heart and soul into the war cause and had made Secretary Buchanan, whose project it was to end his exile, ridiculous.

When Santa Anna came to look the situation over he saw that the weakest point in the American attack was in the north. General Taylor, who had occupied Saltillo, had advanced to Agua Nueva, and then had the flower of his army—nearly all the regulars—taken from him to reinforce Scott, who was to command what was to be the grand invasion by way of Vera Cruz. While Scott's force was being assembled, Santa Anna saw an opportunity to strike Taylor a crushing blow. Taylor's army had been reduced to less than 5,000 men, and of these 90 per cent. were volunteers. With between 20,000 and 21,000 men, Santa Anna marched from the City of Mexico in all haste. Taylor, who had ample knowledge of his movements, evacuated Agua Nueva and retreated to the pass of La Angostura, near the hacienda of Buena Vista, and there awaited the coming of the Mexicans.

It was on February 22, 1847—Washington's birthday—that the Mexicans reached the pass. To try to force it would have been suicidal, for one battery would hold the defile against an army; so Santa Anna prudently sent his men over the hills. When they were well up the heights he opened communication with old Rough and Ready, calling upon him to surrender. He pointed out what folly it would be for Taylor to contend against such overwhelming odds, and declared it would be humane for him to give up his sword and prevent slaughter.

General Taylor's reply was not long, but it was full of meat. In substance it told Santa Anna to come on and fight.

Although Taylor had the advantage of position he had little reason for confidence. Most of his troops were volunteers, many of them raw recruits, who never had been in battle. They were excellent marksmen, had supreme contempt for the Mexicans and a serene belief in themselves, but they were lacing in discipline and experience. But there were some fine soldiers among them. Jefferson Davis, who later was to become President of the Confederacy, commanded a Mississippi regiment of riflemen. Davis was son-in-law of General Taylor. Braxton Bragg, who later was to become a lieutenant-general of the Confederate Army, commanded a battery.

Thomas West Sherman, who later was to become a major-general in the Union army, commanded another battery. General Wool was second in command, and Hardin, Marshall and McKee were among the colonels. A company of Kentuckians was led by a son of Henry Clay.

Taylor had posted riflemen on one of the ridges to dispute the passage of the Mexicans, but early in the morning of the 23d, the American pickets were driven in and soon the Mexican light infantry, led by General Ampudia, came charging down one of the upper passes. Taylor had gone to Saltillo to look to its defense and Wool, who commanded in his absence, had posted Captain Washington's battery on the right and O'Brien's on the left of this pass with infantry and a squadron of dragoons in the centre. The fire from O'Brien's guns checked Ampudia, but this simply was preliminary to the general engagement. A division led by General Pachero had made the passage of the mountains without interference, and coming through a ravine had formed on a ridge at the edge of the plateau. The Second Indiana Regiment and O'Brien's battery were hurried forward to drive them back. The fire of O'Brien's guns was effective, but the Mexicans, too, had brought up a battery and it responded vigorously.

Under the heavy fire of the Mexican infantry and the Mexican battery the Indiana regiment wavered, broke and then fled, leaving O'Brien's men alone with their guns. To add to the panic, another division of the Mexicans, under Lombardini, gained the southern rim of the plateau. The two Mexican columns united and the lancers dashed upon the broken regiment. In its flight the Indiana regiment plunged through the ranks of an Arkansas regiment. This body of volunteers caught the fever of the panic, too, and fled. Only O'Brien and his men held their ground. Every shot from their guns made a gap in the Mexican horde. Half a dozen times the battery was surrounded, but still the men fought on. The Second Illinois was sent to aid the sorely stricken Indiana and Arkansas men, who were being driven off the plateau and into a ravine. For a short time they held the enemy, but the force was too small and had to give way.

With a portion of the American army routed it seemed as if the day was lost. The riflemen who had been posted to dispute the passage over the mountains had been cut off and in an endeavor to rejoin the main force had been slaughtered. But the guns of O'Brien's battery never ceased. Now and then a gunner fell, but another took his place. Ampudia pressed around to the left to strike Wool in the rear, and at the same time a force of Mexicans tried to get through the main pass, but Captain Washington's battery drove it back. The Mexicans were making progress steadily on the plateau, however, and soon would have turned the pass had not Davis and his Mississippians rallied the broken fragments of the Indiana, Arkansas and Illinois regiments.

Never was Jefferson Davis a more glorious figure than that day at Buena Vista. He formed his men and advanced against a force five times his in strength. A rain of bullets poured upon his men, but they went forward steadily. Not until they were close to Ampudia did Davis give the word to fire. Then the hail of bullets that struck the foremost ranks of the Mexicans shattered the line. One more volley drove the enemy to cover. Through it all O'Brien's guns played steadily. Hardly a man of his original force remained. But for O'Brien, Davis never could have formed his men and rallied a portion of the panic-stricken regiments.

When Davis drove Ampudia back O'Brien had a breathing spell. The scene of battle shifted. The Mexican cavalry, led by Torrejon, had crossed the mountains by one of the upper passes and descended on the hacienda of Buena Vista. They were opposed by Marshall's mounted Kentuckians and by Yell's mounted Arkansans. There was a homeric fight in the streets between the cavalrymen, while the little garrison of the hacienda poured shot at the Mexicans from the roofs of the houses. The Americans were greatly outnumbered, but when Torrejon fell, desperately wounded, what was left of his men fled to the mountains.

With Torrejon beaten and Ampudia repulsed, Santa Anna tried a ruse. He sent a flag of truce to Taylor, who meantime had arrived from Saltillo. Firing ceased. Santa Anna pretended that Taylor had displayed a flag, and after much parleying insisted that he merely wanted to know what General Taylor desired. When Taylor discovered the trick he ordered the battle resumed, but meanwhile Ampudia's division had been making its way out of danger, marching through a ravine into which Davis had driven the Mexicans.

Taylor, angered at the treachery of Santa Anna, hurried two regiments, one of Illinoisans and one of Kentuckians, and O'Brien's battery to pursue Ampudia. They hurried toward the head of the ravine, which was at the southern end of the plateau, but when they reached it they found that giving time to Ampudia to extricate himself was not the only thing Santa Anna had in view in his flag of truce ruse. The whole reserve of the Mexican army had been brought forward and was in the ravines nearby, while neighboring ridges were alive with Mexicans.

The two regiments were made up wholly of volunteers. They poured one volley into the Mexicans, and then scores and scores of the men rushed precipitately into the nearest gorge. Its sides were steep and many of the men rolled headlong to the bottom. Most of those who lingered were killed by the fire of the Mexicans. When those who tumbled into the gorge arose they saw at the mouth of the cut a squadron of lancers ready to prevent their escape.

On the plateau O'Brien and his men had been left—deserted as they had been earlier in the day. If his battery was abandoned the two regiments were doomed. If he could hold the enemy at bay for a few minutes there would be time for reinforcements—other batteries, perhaps—to come up.

The Mexicans were pouring out of the ravines onto the plateau and forming. Charge after charge of canister O'Brien sent at the Mexicans. After each discharge he fell back just far enough to load and fire again. He was the centre of a heavy fire himself.

A thousand muskets were being discharged at him. He was wounded and all his men were killed or wounded, but those of the wounded who were able helped him work the guns. He never flinched, but steadily, desperately kept firing, dropping back, loading, firing, praying in agony all the time that aid might come. How many times he fired the guns, how many times he tore great gaps in the lines of the Mexicans never can be known. The Mexicans had no stomach for charging upon that volcano, but he was near the end. The whole force of the reserves were almost upon him when he heard in the rear the crack of whips, the rattle of wheels and the shouts of voices he knew. Then he fired one farewell volley of canister and abandoned his piece. The voices he heard were of Bragg and his men. They unlimbered their guns and opened fire. Hardly had the cannon began than Davis, Sherman and Lane came up on the run, and soon the whole southern plateau was ablaze with fire. A little later Washington's battery opened on the right, throwing shot into the ranks of the lancers who guarded the mouth of the ravine.

The Mexicans could not stand the fire of Davis, Sherman and Lane, and the lancers soon fled from the fire of Washington's guns. When the lancers fled the rest of the reserves followed suit. From the plateau the reserves rushed into the ravines from which they had climbed.

The day was won.

Taylor's men slept on their arms that night, for old Rough and Ready expected Santa Anna would renew the battle on the morrow, but when dawn came the Mexicans were over the mountains. An army of more than 20,000 men had been defeated by an untrained force of less than 5,000.

The Mexicans lost 2,000 and the Americans 764.

For Buena Vista Zachary Taylor was made President of the United States. John Paul Jones O'Brien was not overlooked. For his gallantry he was made a major, but he did not enjoy the honor long, for he died at Indianola, Tex., in 1850. He was only thirty-three when he died, and he was only thirty when he did such brilliant work at Buena Vista. But he did only as a true soldier is expected to do, for he was trained to war. He was born in Philadelphia in 1817, and was graduated from West Point when he was nineteen. Queer that a man who played so brilliant a part in one of the decisive battles of American history should be unknown. A soldier of his class serving under the Little Corporal would have had a niche in the Temple of Fame.

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